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Cuban Prisons

Summary

Since Fidel Castro's takeover in 1959, several types of prisons have existed in Cuba. The most common of these was the state work farm for common criminals and political prisoners believed capable of rehabilitation. Maximum security or closed prisons were for counterrevolutionaries and common criminals accused of a serious crime. A third type of prison was the re-education center which dealt solely with juvenile offenders. In 1966 a fourth type of prison was formed to deal with non-conformists, dissidents and unenthusiastic revolutionaries. In addition, temporary camps were established to provide labor for construction or agricultural projects; only prisoners considered trustworthy were assigned to these camps.

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The prisoner rehabilitation program was voluntary, but prisoners who did not join were subjected to ill treatment and were transferred frequently. To join the program a prisoner had to swear allegiance to the Cuban Government. Most eventually did join in order to make life in prison more tolerable.

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Maximum security prisons housed between 2,000 to 6,000 prisoners while some medium security facilities had as few as 300. Overcrowded conditions in the maximum security prisons resulted in prisoners sleeping in the hallways. Riots and hunger strikes protesting poor food and treatment were common. Escapes were attempted at both maximum and medium security facilities, but most escapees were recaptured.

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Cuban Prisons

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Types of Prisons

Several types of prisons have existed in Cuba since Castro's takeover in 1959. The most common of these was the state work farm or "granja". Most prisoners served their sentences in these medium security institutions, where they underwent rehabilitation while engaged in productive labor. The work farms were for common criminals and certain political prisoners who were thought to be capable of rehabilitation. Although the primary purpose of the work farms was reputedly rehabilitation, they also provided a significant labor force responsible for construction and agricultural work. The Ariza Prison Farm and the Manacas Prison Farm were examples of this type of prison.

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Maximum security or closed prisons were reserved for those common criminals accused of a serious crime, such as murder, and counterrevolutionaries. These prisoners did not perform productive labor, but might be assigned to hard labor. The most notorious of these prisons were Boniato, La Cabana, Castillo San Severino, and Isle of Pines.

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A third type of prison facility was the re-education center for minors which as of 1975 dealt solely with juvenile offenders.

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The fourth type, formed in 1966 and phased out in the early 1970's dealt with predelinquents, homosexuals, dissident intellectuals, wayward bureaucrats and political dissenters. These prisons, which were strictly regimented and characterized by severe discipline, were particularly odious because they existed solely to deal with attitudes of non-conformists, dissidents and unenthusiastic revolutionaries through a harsh program of rehabilitation.

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Temporary prison camps were set up wherever manual labor was needed for tasks such as cutting sugar cane or construction work. Camps were complete with portable kitchens, berthing, and

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shower areas. Only prisoners who were considered trustworthy were selected for these jobs. If a prisoner's home was near the temporary prison, the guards had the authority to authorize the prisoner to go home overnight and return by 0600 the next morning. All prisoners were allowed one monthly visit by their relatives.

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Types of Prisoners

There were two types of prisoners in Cuban prisons, political prisoners and common criminals. Prisoners who rejected a rehabilitation program were known as recalcitrants, reactionaries, or "rebeldes" while those accepting a progam were known as progressives and nicknamed "cuadros" (squares) by the reactionaries. Diehard political prisoners who persistently rejected any rehabilitation program were called "plantados". Those "plantados" who refused to wear the blue prison uniform and wore only their underwear were referred to as "calzones" or "calzoncillos".

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Prison Uniforms

The yellow or khaki uniform, which indicated that a prisoner was rebellious, and did not accept a rehabilitation program, was abolished in 1967 because the Cuban Government felt that the general populace was more sympathetic toward the prisoner who did not accept the program. These were mainly and perhaps solely political prisoners.

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Before 1967 the blue uniform was worn by all those prisoners who had accepted a rehabilitation program. Beginning in late 1967, or early 1968, all prisoners were issued blue uniforms, but those not accepting a rehabilitation program wore a different shade of blue--sometimes a light blue shirt. Many political prisoners, upon having the khaki uniform replaced with a blue one, refused to wear any uniform and were clad only in their underwear.

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Prison Food

Food in general was meagre in quantity and of poor quality. Breakfast consisted of water with sugar and sometimes a piece of bread. Lunch and dinner consisted of variations of rice and beans or noodles. Soviet canned meat was available occasionally. Prior to the general improvement in prison conditions in the late 1960's, meals were often inedible.

Sanitation and Medical Facilities

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These facilities were generally poor. Inmates who were trained in some medical profession often served as doctors, or a

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doctor from a nearby town might visit the prison. Medical supplies were often unavailable, but in some cases visitors could provide prisoners with medicine.

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Rehabilitation

The rehabilitation program was voluntary, but prisoners were subjected to starvation, isolation, or the refusal of medical care to force them to join. Every prisoner was eligible for rehabilitation except for those accused of the most serious felonies, or major political prisoners. Upon accepting the rehabilitation program, a prisoner swore loyalty to the Cuban Government, retracting any anti-Castro political attitude. There were a variety of rehabilitation plans, also called progressive plans, but all included political indoctrination and most followed the same general pattern. From a closed prison the prisoner went to a work farm for reeducation while engaging in productive labor for which he received wages. At a certain point in the program prisoners became eligible for conditional liberties, including passes to leave the work farm for trips home or to town. Leave was entirely unsupervised, and prisoners were expected to return on their own when their leave was up. Passes granted once every forty-five days were usually for three days but might be longer depending on the distance the prisoner must travel. Prisoners were eligible for release after having served 25 percent of their sentence or at least one year in the program. While in the program prisoners attended classes improving their literacy and were indoctrinated in Marxism-Leninism, the goals of the Revolution, the Vietnam War, etc. (In 1979 this indoctrination became voluntary.) The major purpose of this education was not so much to create good revolutionaries, but to "neutralize" negative attitudes toward the Revolution.

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The rehabilitation plan instituted in 1962 was intended to reduce the number of political prisoners in response to internal and external public opinion. The progressive or reeducation plan instituted in 1971 was intended to apply to all prisoners to exploit them as a labor force. In 1979 those prisoners receiving conditional liberties were permitted to send for the money to pay for passage and arrange for their departure from Cuba. The majority of prisoners accepted the new progressive plan, but the 10-20 percent rejecting it were the only ones not released in 1980 even though they had served their sentences.

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Miscellaneous

The majority of prisoners chose a rehabilitation program just to make life in prison more tolerable, since those in the program enjoyed privileges such as extra food, more frequent visits by relatives, and a shorter prison term.

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In mid-1968, the Cuban Government ordered that all prisoners would be confined at facilities located in the area of their

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homes. Construction was begun on new prisons such as La Chafarina which was completed in 1970. The purpose of this was to make rehabilitation easier for the prisoner by having him close to his family and in the proximity of familiar territory. The Cuban Army G-2 ran all political prisons.

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Every six months recalcitrants were asked if they wished to be rehabilitated. Those who refused did not have to attend the political indoctrination sessions, but were mistreated, and had no privileges.

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Prisoners were transferred frequently from one prison to another to harass prisoners and help prevent prisoners from organizing and causing trouble. This also would wear the prisoner down and make him ready to accept the rehabilitation program. Guards were also frequently rotated.

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A typical day's schedule for a prisoner assigned to work:

Reveille	0500
Head count	0600
Breakfast	0630-0700
Work	0700-1200
Lunch	1200-1300
Work	1300-1700
Body search, showers, head count	1700-1730
Dinner	1800
Free/rehabilitation classes	1830-2130
Head count, lights out	2200

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In November 1978 all political prisoners who wanted to leave Cuba were required to complete a form stating why they wanted to leave. In January 1979 those who had completed this form were requested to fill out a second and much shorter form.

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